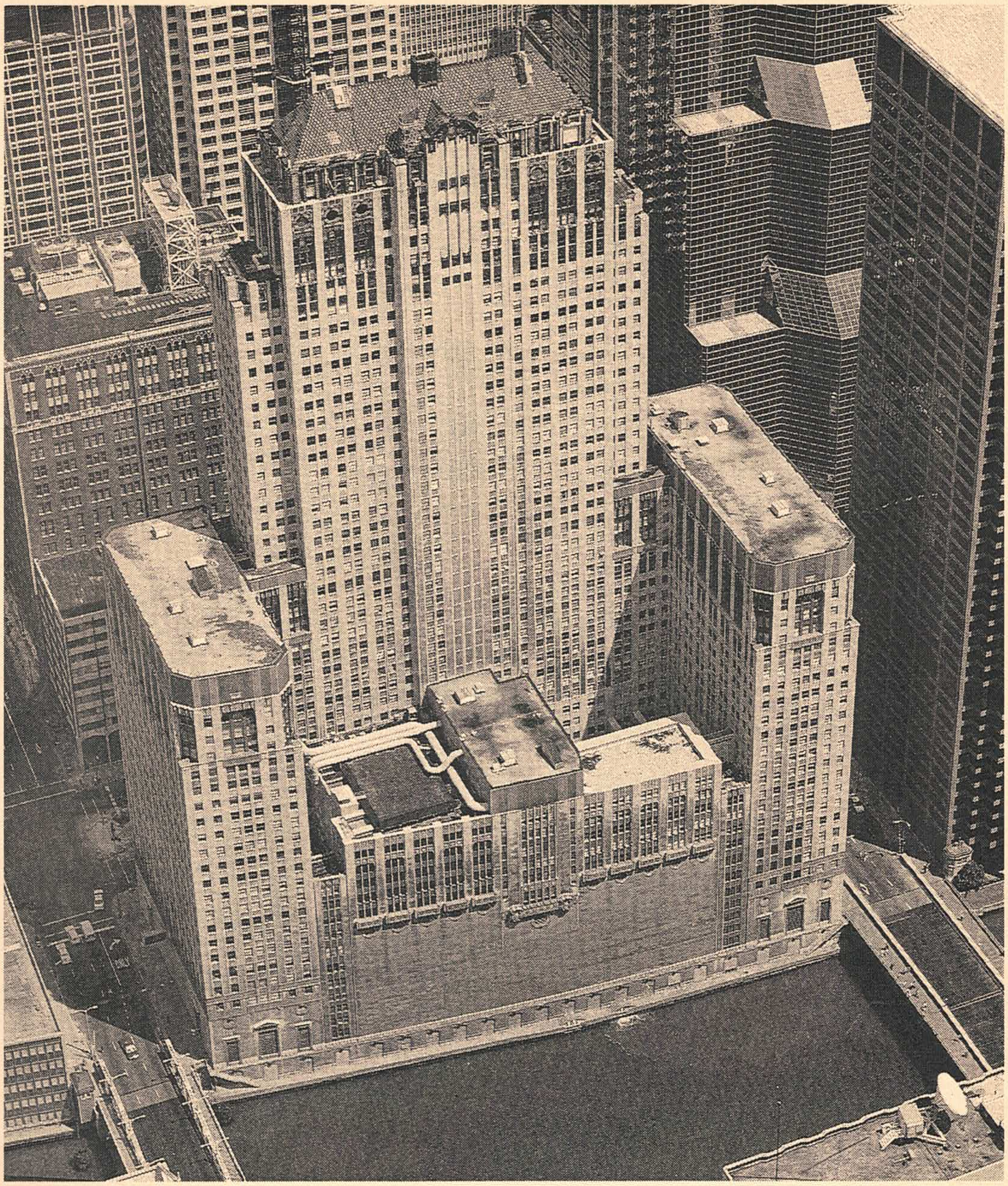
PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION



CIVIC OPERA BUILDING

20 N. Wacker Drive

SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS
OCTOBER 5, 1994

CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Valerie B. Jarrett, Commissioner

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The Commission makes its recommendation to the City Council only after careful consideration. The process begins with an extensive staff study, summarized in this report, which discusses the historical and architectural background and significance of the proposed landmark.

The next step--a preliminary determination by the Commission that the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration--is important because it places the review of building permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission during the remainder of the designation process.

This Preliminary Summary of Information is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the Commission's recommendation to the City Council should be regarded as final.

COVER: The construction of the Civic Opera Building, from 1927 to 1929, initiated the transformation of the West Loop into one of the city's most recognized prime commercial real estate districts.

Civic Opera Building

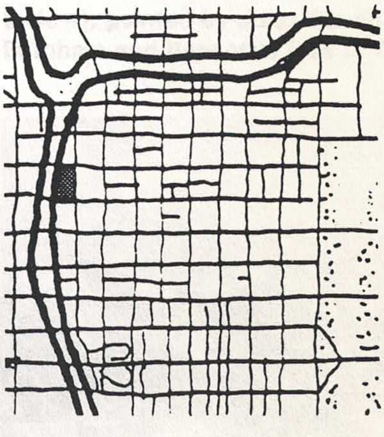
20 N. Wacker Dr.

Date: **1927-29**
Architect: **Graham, Anderson, Probst & White**

The Civic Opera Building was essential in the redevelopment of the West Loop and the riverfront into an extension of the business center of Chicago. In conjunction with the development of Wacker Drive as a prominent boulevard, the construction of the Civic Opera Building as the first high-style building on the south branch of the Chicago River established a precedent for what has since become an area dominated by Class A commercial buildings. A grand structure housing commercial and cultural activities, its impact on the development of the West Loop was in keeping with important aspects of the 1909 *Plan of Chicago.*

The Civic Opera Building is a mixed-use structure that houses both a 3,471-seat auditorium and 662,000 square feet of commercial space. Begun in 1927 and completed in 1929, it was designed by the prominent Chicago architectural firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White. Their design resulted in a structure that incorporates these two functions in an architectural statement of grandeur.

The architects, patrons, and planners who contributed to the creation of the opera house were among the most prominent the city. The most significant of these was Samuel Insull, a local utilities magnate who masterminded the project. Their efforts in transforming the area west of the business center culminated in the construction of a



The Civic Opera Building is located in the West Loop, along the Chicago River.

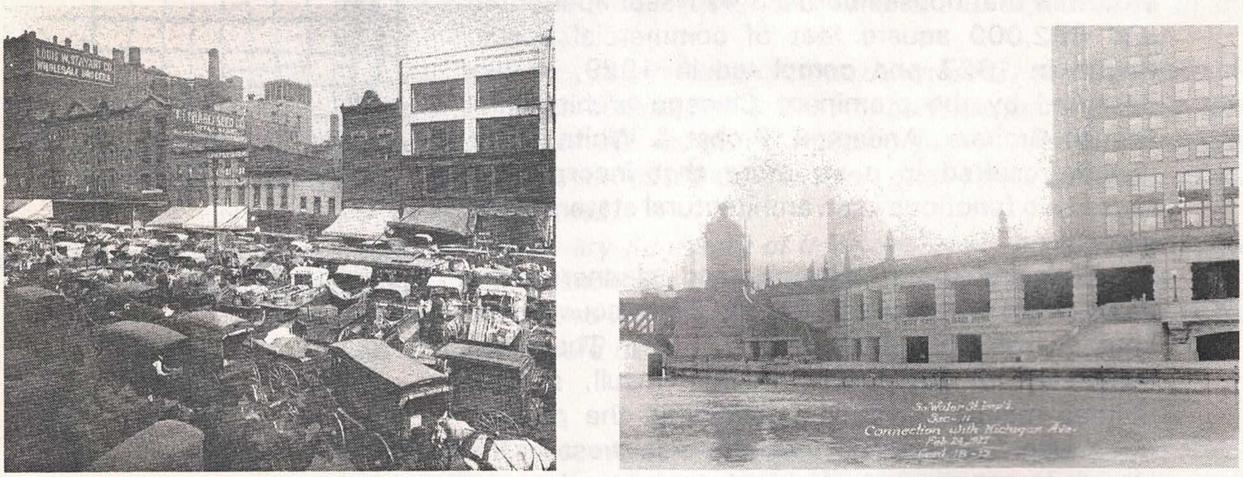
building whose architecture clearly expressed its role as a civic monument to culture and commerce.

As the home of Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Civic Opera Building has fulfilled the role its developers foresaw as an internationally prominent center for musical drama. The fame of its performers and the critically-acclaimed quality of its productions have established the Lyric's reputation for operatic excellence and have perpetuated the building's contribution to the cultural life of the city started by the earlier Civic Opera Company.

The Civic Opera Building and the Burnham Plan

The establishment of the Civic Opera Building made an important contribution to the realization of one aspect of Daniel Burnham's visionary *Plan of Chicago*: the expansion of the central business district to the west.

Written by Burnham and Edward Bennett and with principal illustrations by Jules Guerin, the *Plan of Chicago* was the first attempt to comprehensively address the issues of the future development of Chicago. Commissioned by the Commercial Club of Chicago and completed in 1909, it was intended



The tumultuous character of the riverfront, as illustrated by the South Water Market (left, c.1900), was eliminated by the construction of Wacker Drive. The classical form of the roadway and riverfront esplanade (right, 1927) was inspired by riverfront boulevards in Paris.

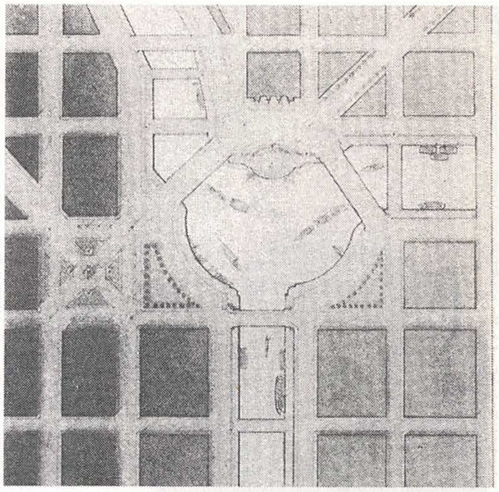
to present a vision of the future city as a well-organized, efficient, and aesthetically pleasing center of commerce, industry and the arts.

Burnham and Bennett's *Plan* borrowed from similar plans for European cities and from Burnham's design for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Using Baron Haussmann's plan of Paris as a prototype, Burnham and Bennett proposed extensive alterations to the existing urban fabric. Essential elements of the plan were the consolidation of the many railroad stations in one strategic location, and the introduction of broad boulevards to facilitate the movement of increasing pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

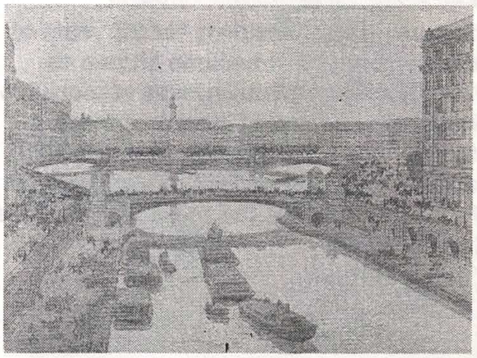
As it had in Paris, this approach presented opportunities to redesign extensive areas of the city and to create new urban environments on a monumental scale. Burnham believed that the business center of the city would expand to the west, and correspondingly proposed a new administrative center west of the river at Congress and Halsted streets. Improvements for rail and vehicular traffic were intended to facilitate developments in this direction, and reached fruition in 1924 with the planning for Wacker Drive and the construction of Union Station.

Burnham and Bennett envisioned that the riverfront would be transformed from a wholesaling and warehouse district to one of prime commercial and civic uses, anchored by institutional entities, particularly government. Drawing from similar riverside developments in major European cities, the *Plan* called for the riverfront to be redeveloped with boulevards and formal public promenades.

The initial step in this regard was taken in 1924 with the construction of Wacker Drive. This riverfront redevelopment was a bi-level boulevard designed by Edward H. Bennett (1874-1954), the co-author of the Burnham plan, who based its *Beaux-Arts* facade on such precedents as the Pont de la Concorde in Paris. By 1927, Wacker Drive was complete from Michigan Avenue to Lake Street and south to Madison Street. The south extension runs a half-block east of the river and provides a unique design opportunity for buildings between it and the boulevard.



Plan of proposed riverfront boulevards at the intersection of the three branches of the Chicago River (above) and a conjectural view of the intersection of the three branches seen from the south (below), painted by Jules Guerin for Burnham and Bennett's *Plan of Chicago*.



On December 9, 1925 the president of the board of the Civic Opera Company, Samuel Insull (1859-1938), spoke for the first time of the idea for a new opera house in an address to the Chicago Association of Commerce. Insull was a business as well as a civic leader who served as president of the board of the Civic Opera Company from its founding in 1922 to its collapse in 1932. A protege of Thomas Edison, Insull was president of the Chicago Edison Company (now known as Commonwealth Edison) from 1892 to 1930.

Samuel Insull, president for 38 years of the company that became known as Commonwealth Edison, was responsible for the expansion of electric service throughout the Midwest. Through his control of utilities and transit companies he became one of the most powerful men in Chicago.

The opera had been performing in the Auditorium Building (430 S. Michigan Ave., 1890), which had become inadequate in terms of its stage, storage, and supporting facilities. At the time, the opera company was criticized artistically for the shortcomings of its facility and its tightly controlled fiscal policies, which were said to stifle creativity. On the other hand, the business interests who supported the company complained that its deficits were too large for it to be sustained over the long term.

Insull's response to the situation was to propose a new mixed-use building that would address both the artistic and financial needs of the company. Not only would a state-of-the-art facility solve the technical problems of operatic production, but the opera would be supported by the rent paid by tenants in a high-rise office tower above the new opera house. By the end of January 1926, Insull announced to the opera subscriber's annual meeting that the company would pursue construction of a new opera house on Wacker Drive. The building would include numerous floors of office space, and would face the new boulevard to the east and the river to the west, between Washington and Madison streets.

The choice to upgrade this location for the opera house complemented the vision of the city as presented by Burnham and Bennett, who stated that the development of boulevards in undistinguished areas would redefine their public image and attract new investment. The site of the Civic Opera Building was in an area then dominated by warehouses.

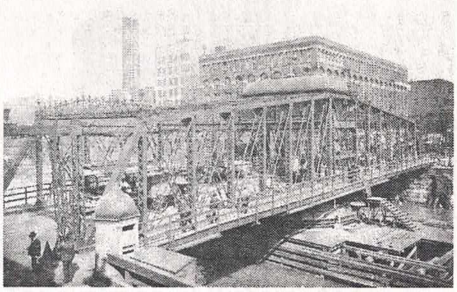
The lower cost of industrial property certainly helped the Civic in assembling its parcel, but the selection of the site was also heavily influenced by Insull. Two structures, the Central Union building and a Commonwealth Edison power plant, were located on the block. As president of the utility, Insull was instrumental in making the property available to the opera company.

Also important to the development of the site was its accessibility to streetcar and nearby elevated service, and to railroads at the Union and Northwestern terminals just across the river. Plans for automotive expressways to connect the Loop with the far West and Northwest Sides reinforced the developer's convictions in regard to the future of the area.

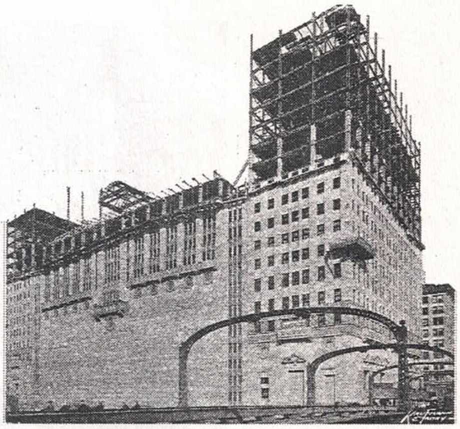
An article in the *Economist* for January 8, 1927, lauded the choice of the site and its relationship to Wacker Drive:

> At no other point within a mile of the central business district could a plot so admirably situated, susceptible of such use and adornment as is contemplated, be obtained... Here is a plaza 140 feet wide extending from Lake to Madison Street affording a much finer opportunity for a generous esplanade than any other point in the city similar to European cities, for example like that which the Grand Opera of Paris faces with plenty of room and no congestion. (p. 112)

The incorporation of the term "civic" into the name of the opera company reflected the board's vision for the opera's role: that it should be a public asset on par with the other great operas of the world. To this end, Insull and his fellow board members came to the conclusion that the artistic and financial situation at the Auditorium was no longer practical. They believed that a new opera house was necessary, and that a perpetual reserve large enough to support the company could be found through the proposed financing scheme. Although Insull sought to advance the art of opera, he insisted that the building was undertaken mainly for financial reasons. Speaking of the building before its construction, he said: "It cannot possibly be purely monumental. It must be commercial - not only self-supporting; it must be profitable." (Davis, Richard L., *Opera in Chicago, 1850-1965*, p. 173)



The site of the Civic Opera Building, as seen from the southwest. The previous structure on the site was the Central Union Block, built in 1890 (above). The view of the Civic under construction was taken in 1928.



The Architects: Graham, Anderson, Probst & White

The Civic Opera Building was designed by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, an architectural firm that saw itself as the heir and perpetuator of the legacy of Daniel H. Burnham. Its design was undertaken at a pivotal period in the firm's history, representing a major change in their stylistic direction. Under chief designer Alfred Shaw, a synthesis of traditional and modern forms was introduced into the firm's designs.

The firm received the commission to design the new opera house in part through Ernest R. Graham's position on the Civic's board of directors. Graham (1868-1936) was one of the chief designers for D.H. Burnham & Company from the late 1890s through 1912, and led it briefly under the name Graham, Burnham and Company before establishing his own firm in 1917. Graham, Anderson, Probst & White was known nationally for its designs of large-scale commercial buildings clothed in historic styles. Throughout its commercial work, the firm continued the propensity for classical design established by Burnham with the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Graham, Anderson, Probst & White designed many large-scale buildings with particular attention to their impact on the city, contributing when possible to the realization of the vision expressed in the *Plan of Chicago*.

These conservative design theories were put into practice by Peirce Anderson (1870-1924), chief designer of the firm, whose affection for classical architecture was established through his training at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts.* With Graham, he designed the classically-detailed Illinois Merchants Bank and Office Building of 1923, now known as Continental Bank, and the Union Station of 1924.

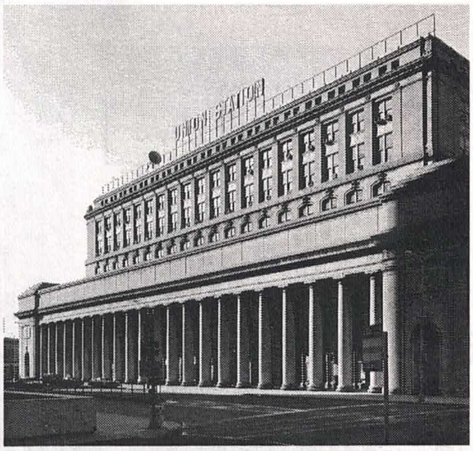
The architect of the Civic Opera Building was Alfred P. Shaw (1895-1970), whom Graham promoted to chief designer after Anderson's death in 1924. Shaw shared Graham's enthusiasm for classical architecture and the heritage of the Burnham and Bennett plan. As a member of the executive committee of the Chicago Plan Commission, he was familiar with Bennett and the efforts to construct Wacker Drive.

Although he had an appreciation for the classical, Shaw sought to bring a modern interpretation to its use in contemporary design. Under his leadership, the designs of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White continued to reference classical architecture, while introducing an emphasis on simplified modern forms. Streamlined commercial highrises featuring setbacks and stepped overall massing became a prominent part of the firm's work.

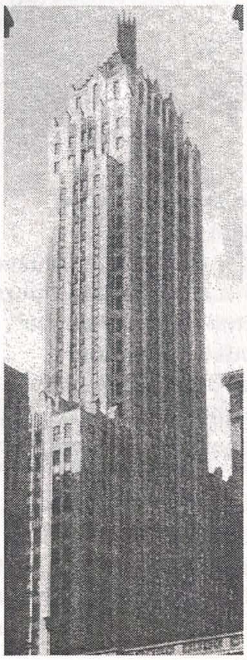
These designs were in part a response to Eliel Saarinen's second-prize design for the 1922 Tribune Tower competition. This unbuilt project introduced local architects to a new form of modernism that used simplified masses and a vertical emphasis to create an interpretation of skyscraper design that was more abstract and less traditional in character.

The designs were also responding to the advent of zoning ordinances. Through zoning the limitations of size were more precisely defined, establishing a formula that required new buildings to be smaller in plan on their upper levels to allow more light and air to reach the street. The problems architects faced in meeting the requirements of the law, and the opportunities provided by the example of Saarinen, contributed to the introduction of towers and setbacks to highrise commercial design.

Graham, Anderson, Probst & White's evolving approach was demonstrated in two buildings designed by Shaw prior to the Civic Opera House: the Pittsfield Building of 1926-27, at 55 East Washington Street in Chicago, and the Kopper's Building of 1926-29 in Pittsburgh. In these structures Shaw retained the symmetry of plan and elevation and the materials that characterized the firm's *Beaux-Arts*-inspired designs under Anderson. However, a more modern abstract treatment was introduced by emphasizing the verticality of the skyscrapers and by simplifying details in geometric patterns. "Both Shaw and his chief, Graham, were eager to earn a reputation for keeping up with the times without being *avant-garde*: they wanted an image that captured the best of the old and the best of the new." (Chappell, Sally. *Graham, Anderson, Probst and White*, p. 56)



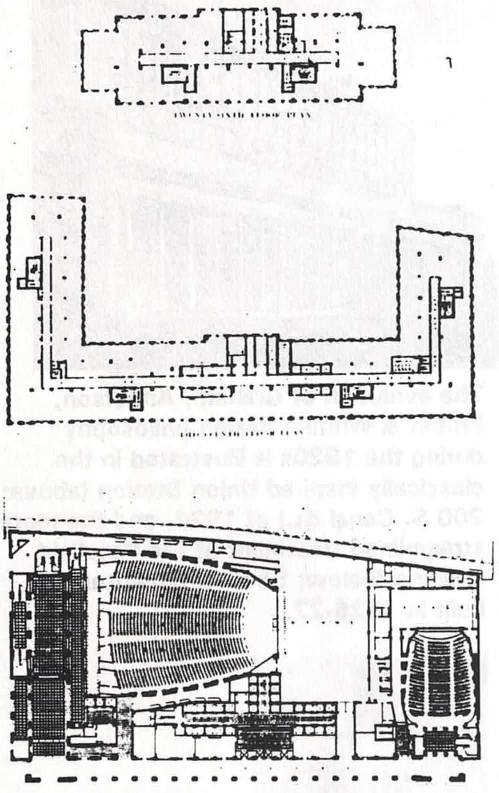
The evolution of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White's design philosophy during the 1920s is illustrated in the classically inspired Union Station (above; 200 S. Canal St.) of 1924, and the more streamlined treatment of the Pittsfield Building (below; 55 E. Washington St.), built in 1926-27.



The Site and Layout of the Civic Opera Building

Occupying an entire city block, the Civic Opera Building is a monumental, free-standing structure. The auditorium of the opera house is on the river, set behind the office towers which form three sides of the building. The facade is symmetrical and is dominated by a grand colonnade that runs nearly the length of the entire city block.

The opera house, theater and their lobbies and support areas occupy nearly the entire first seven floors of the structure, with the opera's fly space extending up into the twelfth story. The remaining space within the 45-story tower is dedicated to commercial use, including the storefronts along the colonnade, offices, and the Tower Club. The building has a total of 739,600 square feet, of which 662,000 are for rentable space. The remaining space is occupied by the 3,471-seat opera house and its supporting areas.

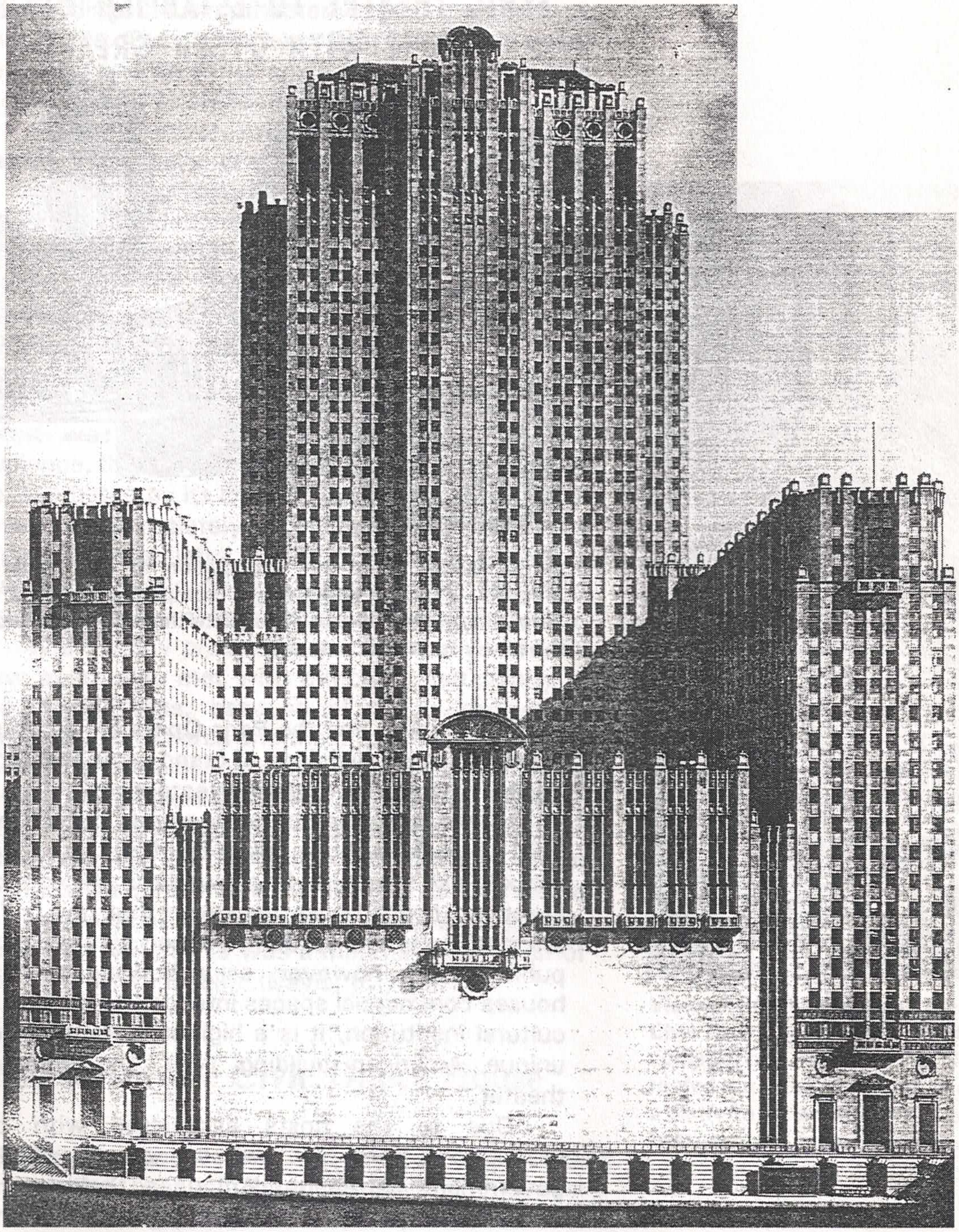


The plan of the Civic Opera Building corresponds to its dual arts and commercial functions. Offices are housed in the tower (top) and intermediate floors (center), and the latter form a U-shape around the opera house auditorium below. The first floor (bottom) is almost entirely occupied by the opera house, its support areas, and the office tower lobby.

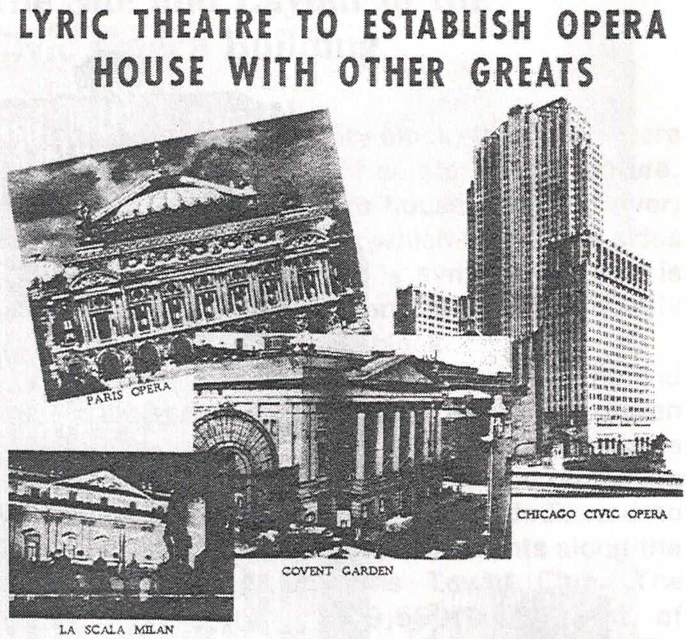
In plan the U-shaped office towers embrace the opera house, forming the distinctive riverfront elevation that, with the plaza of the contemporary Daily News Building to the west, redefined the riverfront. The first seven floors of the south tower house the opera house lobby, the grand staircase, and the lobbies for the boxes and balconies, while the north tower housed the Civic Theater.

The structural problems presented by this mixed-use building's uses and its site challenged its engineers. The massive weight of the towers had to be carried around the open spaces of the two auditoria. Caissons were carried down to an unusual depth for that period of 115 feet. The west wall along the river had to be braced in the event of a riverboat collision. The steel frame also required elaborate cross-bracing along the east wall of the auditorium, where the forces of compression from the tower were greatest. The engineering was accomplished by Magnus Gunderson, a structural engineer with the firm.

The developers of the Civic Opera Building believed that its distinctive location allowed it to be a free-standing structure in a setting as prominent as those of the great European opera houses. La Scala in Milan, the Stattsoper in Vienna, London's



The Civic Opera Building shortly after its completion in 1929. Sometimes referred to as "Insull's throne" for what was perceived as Samuel Insull's imperious attitude toward business and civic matters, the Civic Opera Building has been a distinctive edifice on the western edge of the central business district for almost seventy years. (The pediment at the lower center, atop the opera house, has since been removed for mechanical equipment; see front cover).


LYRIC THEATRE TO ESTABLISH OPERA HOUSE WITH OTHER GREATS

PARIS OPERA
CHICAGO CIVIC OPERA
COVENT GARDEN
LA SCALA MILAN

An illustration from the first edition of Lyric Opera of Chicago's Chicago Opera News, comparing the Civic with other great opera houses to indicate the high aspirations of the newly founded company.

Covent Garden, and the Paris Opera are all housed in free-standing buildings of grand scale and formal design that dominate their streetscapes.

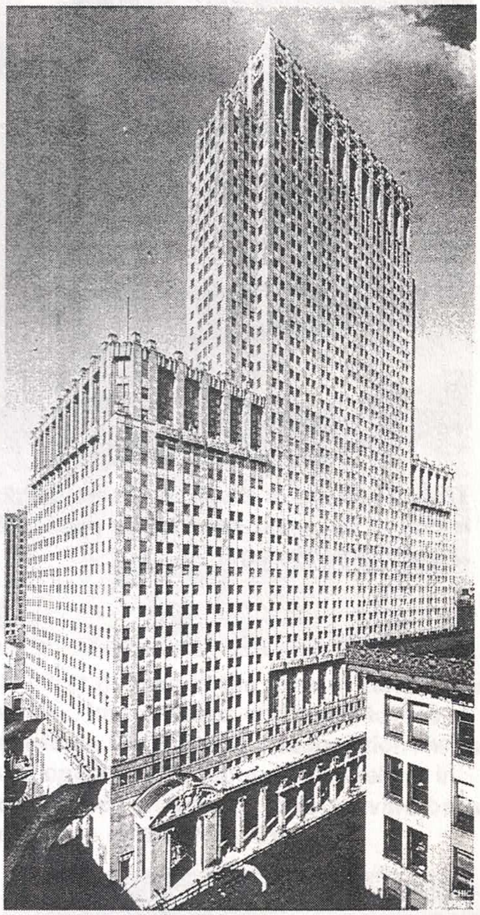
Unlike its European counterparts, which were built as single-purpose public buildings, the Civic is a mixed-use structure. It followed the precedents of European opera house design in that it is a free-standing cultural institution defined by a prominent public space; however, as a building that also houses commercial spaces intended to support the cultural institution, it is a high-style example of a unique American building type, the mixed-use theater.

Due to the costs associated with their productions, and in the absence of royal or government patronage, American theatrical and musical companies have always needed to find private sources of income. This has led to the development of the mixed-use performing arts structure in which rent generated by commercial or residential tenants provides support for the facilities and productions of theater, orchestra, or opera companies. While they have no precedent in historic

European architecture, in the United States mixed-use buildings housing theaters appeared as early as the 1790s. They have been built since from coast to coast, and on every scale from vaudevilles and movie palaces to orchestral halls and opera houses.

Shaw, however, took advantage of the site to associate the building with the traditional image of a free-standing opera house in the European tradition. The decorative scheme reinforced these associations with motifs that exclusively evoke musical themes. Although the building differs substantially from its European prototypes in scale due to its commercial functions, Shaw was able to combine these elements to create a mixed-use structure with unique cultural associations. The effort was successful in that, for the opera's audience, the experience of approaching the Civic is so dominated by its colonnade that the commercial tower is completely obscured. The building's prominent silhouette on the downtown skyline is due to its commercial use, yet the tower serves to signify the cultural importance of the opera house.

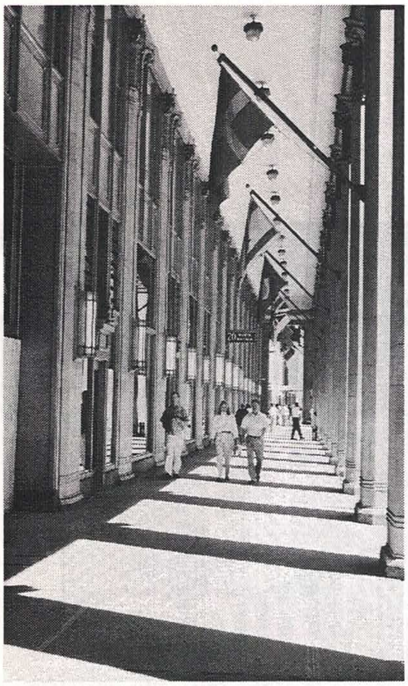
While many praised it, the location of Insull's new opera also met with criticism, particularly in the music press, because of the working-class reputation of the area and the offensive smell of the river. The coincidence that one of Insull's utilities already owned part of the site contributed fodder to critics who saw him as a manipulator, mixing his businesses and civic activities with impunity. Edgar Lee Masters condemned the building as an example of the developer's exceptional ego, writing with irony that "All of this was a material expression of the super-man, Insull." (Davis, p. 180)



View of the Wacker Drive facade of the Civic Opera Building shortly after its completion in the fall of 1929. The shed-roofed structure in front of the portico is a platform for an elevated spur that was later removed from the boulevard.

Exterior of the Civic Opera House

The design of the Civic Opera House was among the best of the large-scale commercial structures designed by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White during Alfred Shaw's years as chief designer. Symmetrical in its east and west elevations, it is a 45-story structure with a 22-story main block and a 23-story tower with set backs. The tower is capped with a hipped roof, a detail that Shaw



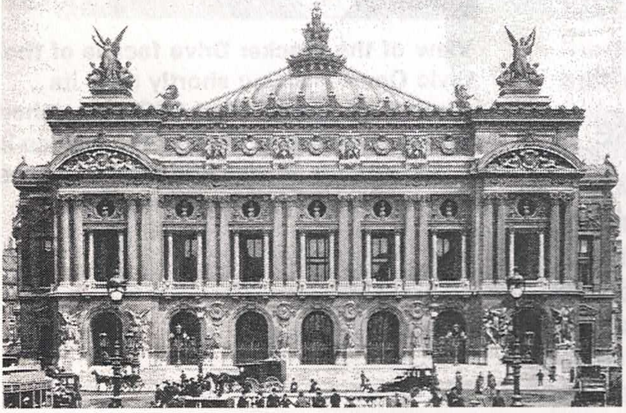
The colonnade of the Civic Opera Building is one of the most spectacular pedestrian amenities in Chicago.

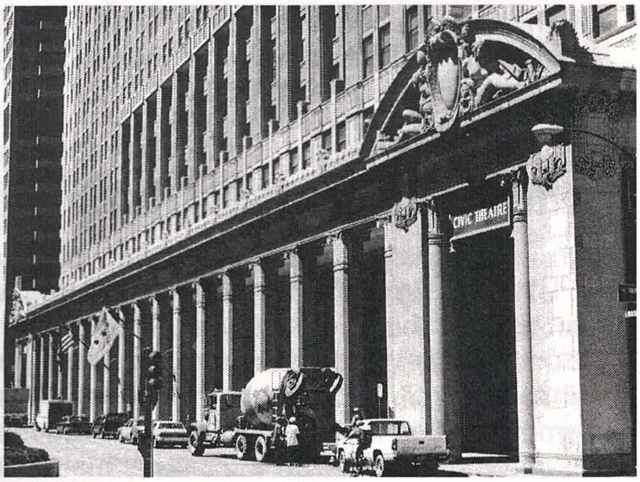
included as a reference to high-rises of the previous generation, such as Burnham and Root's Masonic Temple Building, built in 1892, and as a refutation of the use of flat roofs by such contemporary European designers as Walter Gropius.

The entire composition of the exterior was given a modern sense of verticality, emphasized by continuous limestone piers and recessed spandrels. The decorative treatment of the walls is minimal, and takes the form of abstracted classical designs. The decorative program is prominent along the Wacker Drive portico and at the roof lines of the various setbacks.

Shaw described the ornamental style as a modernized version of the French Renaissance, and justified its use on this skyscraper due to the "old, conservative traditions of opera." (Lee, *Architectural Record*, p. 496). This decorative treatment features terra cotta lyres, trumpets, palm fronds and laurel leaves that reinforce the associations of the building with the traditions of opera.

The principal facade on Wacker Drive is dominated by the monumental colonnade on the ground floor, which was designed after the engaged colonnade on the second level of the facade of the Paris Opera. Dominating the entire Wacker Drive front, its octagonal columns in a modernized Corinthian order stand thirty-five feet tall. At its





The design of the portico of the Civic Opera Building reflects the engaged colonnade on the upper facade of the Paris Opera (left). While similar, the Civic's portico is different in scale and detail, being longer, deeper, and having stylized geometric columns and capitals (right).

north and south ends stand porticos with segmental arch pediments. The pediments and their figurative relief sculpture marked the entrances to the respective lobbies of the Civic Theater (prior to its demolition in 1994) and the Civic Opera House.

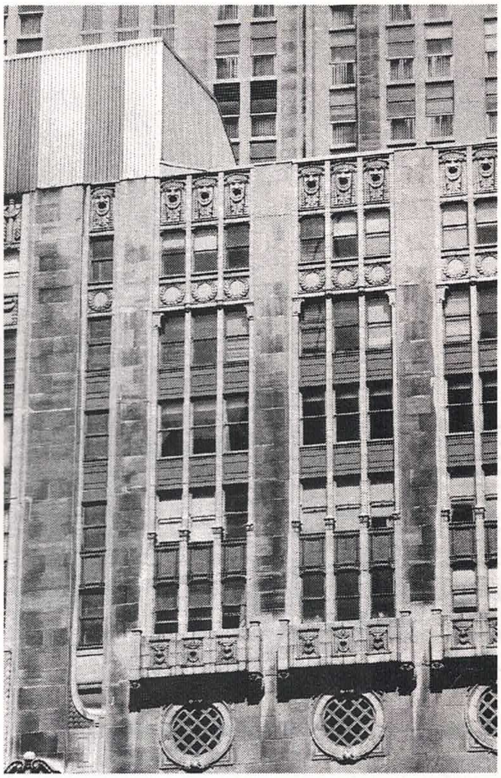
The colonnade provides a grand promenade that is rare in the city and appropriate to the style and use of a grand opera house. Retail storefronts line the colonnade, each having an ornate classically-detailed frame. Near the center of the colonnade is the elevator lobby for the commercial tenants on floors eight through forty-five. A freight entrance for the opera house is located near the north end.

On the west, the unique shape of the riverfront elevation is formed by the setbacks of the towers which embrace the opera house. This facade can be seen as an enormous armchair, its "seat" formed by the roof of the opera, its "arms" by the 22-story sections on the north and south, and its "back" by the 45-story tower. Insull's critics, charging that he had built the building as a monument to himself, derisively referred to the river elevation of the building as his "throne".

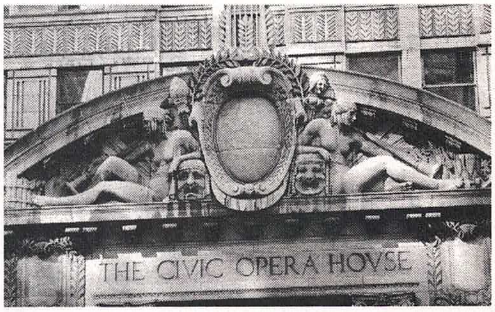
In the context of the Burnham plan, the riverfront elevation is both successful and disappointing. Its monumental scale and form defined the western edge of the central business district, dominating the skyline. Closer in, however, the elevation does not include a promenade like those specified in the plan, or like the plaza that faces it in front of the Daily News Building.

Below the street level the river elevation has a foundation faced with banded rustication. This was in keeping with the classical treatment of promenades projected in Jules Guerin's illustrations for the *Plan of Chicago*, and with the design of the Wacker Drive Esplanade. Above this level the exterior of the opera house auditorium is barren of any ornament or punctuation up to the line of the sixth floor. Atop this plain wall, the opera house has an engaged colonnade that originally had a pediment as a central motif. This device was repeated at the top of the tower some 30 stories above, and helped unify the two functions of the building in one decorative ensemble.

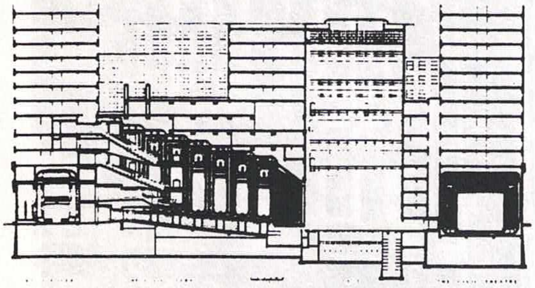
While the exterior of the Civic Opera Building retains a high degree of integrity, some of the



Musical themes in the form of terra cotta masks, instruments, and laurel leaves reinforce the building's associations with the operatic arts (above). The reliefs in the portico pediments (below) were based on those of the Paris Opera.



details of the cornices have been removed on the 22-story setbacks and replaced with a metal facing. The most significant alteration on the exterior was the addition of air conditioning equipment atop the opera house. This addition altered the roof and the roof line, with the resulting loss of the pediment at the center of the riverside elevation. In spite of the alteration, the verticality of the elevations remains uncompromised.



A sectional view through the Wacker Drive elevation of the Civic shows the relationship of the commercial space to the auditorium and the enormous stage and fly areas. The smaller Civic Theater, since demolished, is to the lower right.

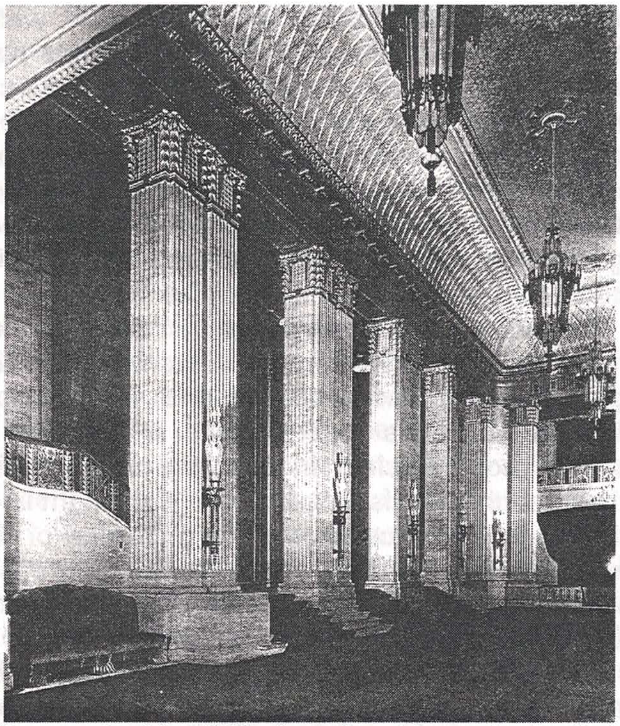
Interior Design

The interiors of the Civic Opera Building are distinguished according to their function. The lobby and auditorium of the opera house are decorated in a sumptuous manner that, while remaining conservative in taste, was inspired by the opulence of European opera houses. In contrast, the detailing of the commercial spaces is restrained and conservative in keeping with the business-like nature of the activities they house.

The good and bad lessons learned from Chicago's other major opera house, the Auditorium Building, were addressed in the organization of spaces on the interior of the opera house. The first floor lobby, which measures 52 feet wide by 84 feet long, answered the problems of the small lobbies of the Auditorium, providing more space and a better traffic pattern for ingress and egress. Similarly, the box office was separated from the lobby of the opera, avoiding the previous problem in the old building of ticket holders wading through the box office lines to get to their seats.

The interior scheme of the opera house represents the most expansive interior design project by Jules Guerin (1866-1946), the artist best known for the watercolor illustrations he executed for Burnham and Bennett's *Plan of Chicago*. Guerin, who maintained an office in New York, was renowned for his architectural renderings and murals as well as his skills as a colorist.

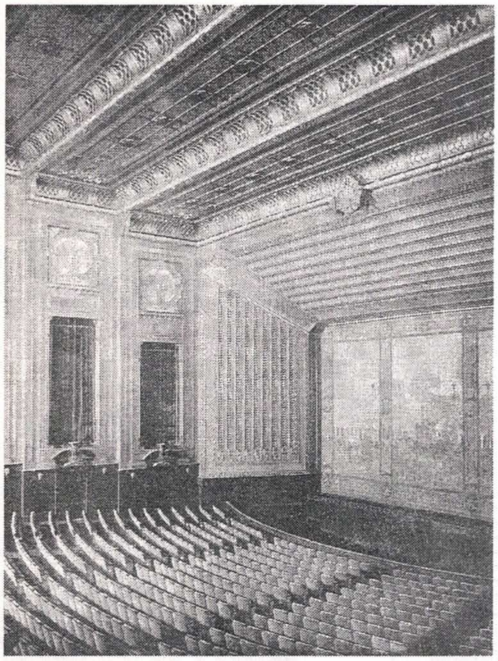
Trained in the *Beaux-Arts* tradition, he worked with its major proponents in Chicago. Guerin's collaborations with Graham, Anderson, Probst and White included the murals for the banking hall of the Illinois Merchants Bank, now Continental Illinois



As seen in this 1929 view, the elaborately detailed foyer, designed by renowned architectural renderer and colorist Jules Guerin, evokes the grandeur of European opera houses.

Bank, of 1923-24. He was also color consultant for the interior of the Grand Hall of Union Station, of 1924-25, and executed the murals and first floor interior design of the Merchandise Mart, completed in 1931.

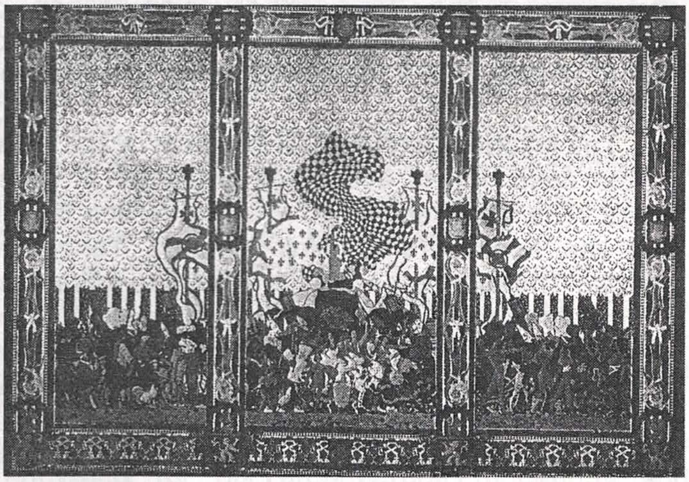
The luxurious materials and colors of the lobby of the opera house evoke the character of grand opera. The walls are faced with travertine marble and the floors are of pink-and-gray Tennessee marble. The fixtures, from the Art Deco-influenced geometric designs of the wall sconces to the elevator doors, railings and chandeliers, were bronze. The vaulted 44-foot- high ceiling is painted in hues of orange and red, and trimmed in gold leaf. The color scheme of the entire interior was executed in gold, cadmium red, rose, and mixture of cadmium yellow with vert emeraude. By using these colors consistently on the walls and ceilings, and in the fabrics and carpeting, Guerin unified the spaces of the lobby and the auditorium into a singular and sumptuous ensemble.



The auditorium, with its luxurious classical French decoration, is funnel-shaped to promote its acoustic qualities.

The auditorium interior is progressively wider from the stage to the rear of the house. This plan corresponds to the dimensions of the parcel which, due to the course of the Chicago River, is 29 feet shorter on its north end than on the south. Shaw oriented the opera's auditorium to take advantage of the odd shape of the lot, placing its narrow, stage end to the north and its widest section, in the balconies, in the southern part of the block.

The interior was given shape by bays that step out and up progressively with distance from the stage. The result was in keeping with the principle of interior acoustics that a space shaped like a funnel is most efficient in carrying sound to its furthest reaches. It also assures excellent sight lines to the stage, but necessitated the exclusion of the horseshoe-shaped interior traditional for opera houses in Europe. This eliminated side boxes, and effectively reduced the number of boxes from 56 at the Auditorium to 31 at the Civic. In reducing the number of boxes, Insull stated that the new opera house demonstrated democratic principles, contrary to the elitism of the plan of European houses.



Guerin considered the steel fire curtain as the "fourth wall" and focal point of the auditorium. The mural is painted on canvas and attached to the steel. The image includes figures from over 80 operas, conveying the pageantry, drama, and excitement of the musical theater. The same colors used throughout the interior are repeated in the mural, making it the climactic statement of the interior.

The lower walls of the opera house interior are paneled in oak. The upper walls are divided into bays by engaged piers, and each bay is decorated with the same lyres, trumpets, palm fronds and laurel leaves used in the detailing of the exterior. The ceiling is formed by a series of panels that carry stenciled patterns framed by gold leafed borders.

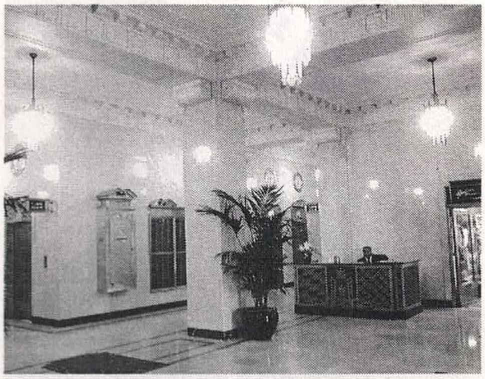
The proscenium arch is in the form of a grand gold-leafed picture frame, with an opening 35 feet tall by 55 feet wide. Guerin considered this to be the fourth and most important wall of the auditorium interior. Because of its prominence, he brought the decorative scheme to its climax here, with a painting that celebrates the traditions of the opera attached to the steel fire curtain.

Reflecting the treatment of the walls, the painting is divided vertically into three panels. Using the colors of the interior, it depicts a procession of characters from over 80 operas, moving from left to right in a state of revelry. The stage, which was almost entirely behind the proscenium originally, has been extended since 1975 over the orchestra pit.

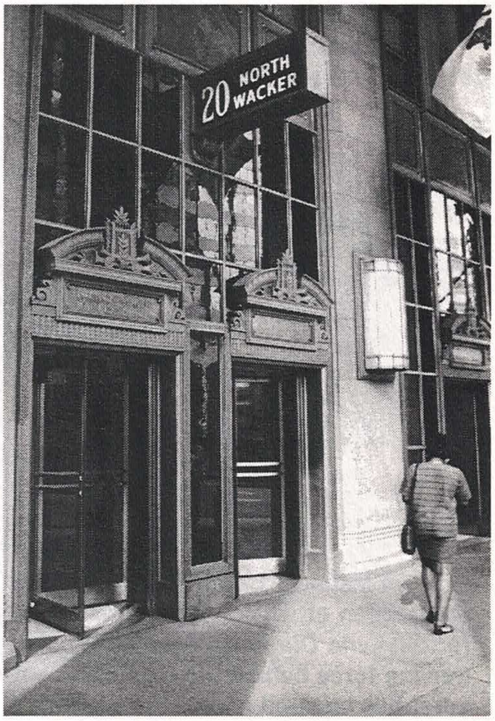
Preparations for the building included a tour of European opera houses by the Civic's design committee. The results of this expedition particularly effected the form of the mechanical systems and backstage areas of the new house. The pride of the new opera's mechanicals was in the technical sophistication of its stage and lighting. In addition to its advanced technical systems, the size and configuration of the stage and fly space was larger and more flexible than those of its predecessor, and solved the company's production problems.

Beneath the stage, hydraulic lifts in two sub-basements allow for a great deal of diversity in set design. After touring European opera houses, the design committee concluded that the existing hydraulic understage system in the Auditorium was superior to all others, and modeled the new Civic stage on it. This system became a prototype for other theaters, including Radio City Music Hall in New York.

The interior design of the Civic Theater was a smaller variation on that of the opera house, making use of many of the same decorative motifs and a similar color scheme. The theater had a single



Decorated in white marble and trimmed with bronze fixtures, the interior of the office tower lobby is restrained in comparison with the opera house. The entrance (below), like the storefronts that flank it, has a classically detailed frame.



balcony facing a proscenium that formed a massive gold frame around the stage. This space was demolished in 1994 to make way for additional storage and backstage areas for the opera, and represents the only significant change to the interior of the building. This change became necessary due to the expanding needs of operatic production, both current and projected.

The interiors of the office tower are, in keeping with the seriousness of its business function, much less ornate than those of the public spaces in the building. The lobby of the office tower is decorated in a manner that reflects the classical detailing of the rest of the building and connects it to musical themes, but is restrained in color and detail.

In 1930, Edward Moore wrote of the intention behind the interior design of the new opera house in his book *Forty Years of Opera in Chicago*: "...the whole idea has been to preserve the fine features of the old Auditorium, while adding to them every idea that will add to the quality of the new achievement both before and behind the footlights." (p. 338) In this the architects, designers, and patrons realized considerable success, creating a home for grand opera that was the envy of the operatic world.

The Lyric Opera Company

General manager Carole Fox (third from right), seen at a 1954 fund-raising dinner for the Lyric Opera Company, was the moving force behind the establishment of what has become one of the world's most highly regarded operatic organizations.

Celebrating its 40th anniversary season in 1994-95, the Lyric Opera of Chicago has fulfilled the initial vision for the building, making it the home of one of the preeminent opera companies in the world. Over the years, the company and the Civic Opera Building have become identified with one another, an association that has been reinforced and formalized through the Lyric's recent purchase of the lower floors of the building, including the opera house, its lobbies, and the former Civic Theater.

The Lyric was founded in late 1953 by a group of opera lovers, led by Carole Fox, under the name Lyric Theater. Seeking to again establish a resident opera company in Chicago, it staged two "calling card" performances of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" at the Civic Opera House in February, 1954. The production included performers from the

Metropolitan Opera of New York and the Paris Opera.

The success of these performances bore fruit almost immediately, and financial support from a wide range of sources allowed the Lyric to organize its first season for the fall of 1954. Looking back on opera history in Chicago and on the reception of their own efforts that spring, the Lyric's organizers decided that, if circumstances forced a choice between quantity and quality, only the highest quality should be pursued to guarantee the future of the company.

To this end the Lyric's first season consisted of eight operas, a number of productions that was substantially smaller than those produced by earlier Chicago companies. At the same time, the Lyric managed to lure some of the greatest operatic talent in the world to its stage that season, including the American debuts of soprano Maria Callas, mezzo-soprano Giulietta Simionato, and baritone Tito Gobbi. In selecting famous performers, the Lyric sought "to rejuvenate the standard repertoire not necessarily through production, but through the introduction of new musical personalities." (*Chicago Opera News* #1, p. 1)

The Lyric was able to sign these prominent performers on what was, by the standards of the 1990s, impossibly short notice. This was due in part to the timing of its season, which started before those in Europe; the greater flexibility in the schedule of the vocalists, made possible by the expansion of intercontinental air travel; and the circumstances of the post-World War II era. European companies in the throes of rebuilding could not afford long-term contracts, making performers more available on relatively short notice.

These events created a unique opportunity for the Lyric to establish a solid artistic reputation from the start. By signing prominent performers the fledgling company scored a major coup, bringing it to international attention and guaranteeing the artistic success of its first season. The Lyric's stated goal was to establish the best possible opera company, and the signing of major stars was one way of ensuring its success. "Madame Callas is important not just as the superb singer that she is, but as a symbol of the artistic integrity and high

The early success of the Lyric was due in part to its association with Maria Callas, a diva known for her fiery performances on and off stage. She appeared in Verdi's *La Traviata* (above) in 1954. A beleaguered process server (below) incited her ire after a performance at the Civic in 1955.

purpose of the entire undertaking." (*Chicago Opera News* #1, p. 1)

During its first season the Lyric also staged the world premier of the "Taming of the Shrew" by Vittorio Giannini. The presentation of new operas, as well as their performance by internationally prominent artists, have become traditions of the Lyric Opera throughout its history. This tradition has been continued with the introduction of such new operas as the 1987 presentation of "Satyagraha" by Philip Glass, and by commissioning works through its artist in residence program, including "McTeague" by William Bolcom, which debuted in 1992.

In addition to being one of the most celebrated operatic performers in the world, Mary Garden served as general manager of the Chicago Opera Association. The company's 1921 season was famed for its artistic excellence and financial extravagance.

The Civic Opera in Chicago's Operatic Tradition

The Lyric Opera is the only resident company in Chicago opera history to succeed both artistically and financially over any extended period. Though the city has had an avid audience for opera that dates to the first local performance in 1850, several previous attempts to form opera companies had failed.

It was not until 1909 that the city's first resident opera, the Chicago Grand Opera Company, was founded. One of the Grand Opera's featured stars was Chicagoan Mary Garden, who had dropped out of Hyde Park High School in the 1890s to study opera in Paris. Garden became an international star, and her friendship with composer Claude Debussy led to her 1902 world debut of the role of Melisande in his "Pelleas et Melisande" at the Paris Opera. In 1910 she performed the role in the American debut of the opera at the Auditorium. By 1921 the Chicago opera was under Garden's direction; she performed, directed, and ran the finances of the company all at once. The 1921 season, highlighted by the world premier of Sergei Prokofiev's "The Love for Three Oranges", was very well received artistically and musically. However, the single-season deficit of over $1 million crushed the company financially, forcing its reorganization.

The Chicago Civic Opera Company was founded in the wake of Garden's extravagant season, in January, 1922. Its board of trustees was made up of a singularly impressive list of prominent Chicagoans. In addition to Samuel Insull, its other members included John G. Shedd, Harold F. and Edith Rockefeller McCormick, Martin A. Ryerson, Edward Swift and many others. The presence of entrepreneurs on the board reflected the perception that the previous company had been run into the ground by the excesses of the artists. In contrast, the stated policy of the Civic Opera Company was that it was to be run as a business. The focus on fiscal responsibility was essential to the vision of the board, and would later motivate it to approve Insull's plan to build a new opera house within a mixed-use facility.

During the 1920s, the Chicago Civic Opera Company was largely successful artistically and financially. Before the founding of the Lyric, writers spoke of this period as a "Golden Era of Chicago Opera" when all dreams, no matter how grandiose, seemed possible on stage and off. The company produced over 30 operas each year, and gained a reputation for the quality of its work. It was also known for innovative programs, including what was reputedly the world's first broadcast of live opera on local radio. By 1926 the Civic and the National Broadcasting Company broadcast the first nationwide live opera programming to originate outside of New York.

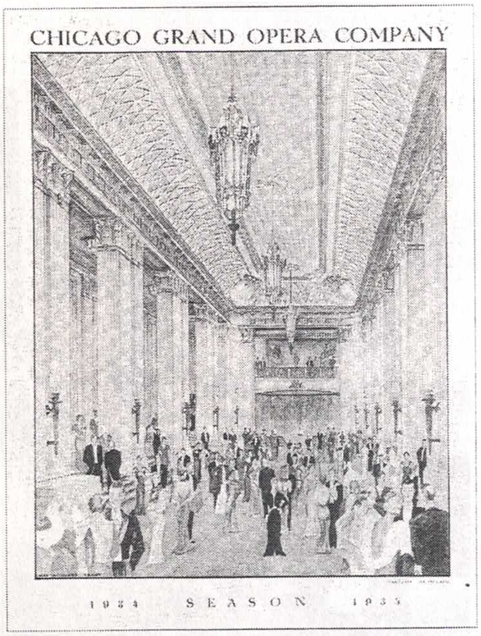
These activities built to a crescendo in 1929, a momentous year for the Civic Opera Company from its implementation of a series of new artistic initiatives to the completion and gala opening of its new opera house: six European scholarships for post-graduate operatic study were endowed, a ballet school was founded, and plans were announced for a chorus school and an orchestra school.

When the Civic Opera House opened on November 4, 1929, with a performance of Giuseppi Verdi's "Aida", Samuel Insull stood in the foyer welcoming members of the audience in person. He had made significant strides toward his goal to make Chicago an international center of operatic excellence, and had done it on a colossal scale.

With the opening of the new opera house, the Civic Opera Company was at the height of its success and confident of its future. Edward Moore, in *Forty Years of Opera in Chicago*, published in 1930, projected that sense of confidence:

> The dream of Mr. Insull and his associates... was to put the opera company on what seems to have worked out as an unshakably permanent basis, to move it into a magnificent new home of its own, and to provide it with funds for operation which should last through many generations to come. (p. 250)

Moore elaborated on the financial situation of the new opera house, noting that the rental income from the commercial tenants was anticipated to provide generous surpluses for the use of the opera company. Lauding the work of the trustees, he concluded that "practically nothing has been left to chance." (p. 341)



Despite the advent of the Great Depression, an aura of refinement and opulence surrounded the opera house, as suggested by this 1934 program for the second Chicago Grand Opera Company. Like its local predecessors, this company was a victim of inadequate financial support, lasting only two years.

The Depression and the Delayed Development of the West Loop

Unfortunately, the Great Depression caused the almost immediate collapse of all of these carefully laid plans. The timing of the opera house was inauspicious, its gala opening occurring nine days after the stock market collapse of Black Tuesday. Insull had rented a substantial portion of the commercial space on the upper floors of the building to his utility companies, and located his own office in an enormous suite at the top of the building, on the 45th floor. However, the economic conditions of the time made it impossible to secure enough tenants to pay the mortgage and support the opera. The few who moved into the building were able to negotiate leases at rates considerably lower than those of a few years earlier, making the income less than had been anticipated.

The Civic Opera Company was put under further financial stress when box office receipts fell dramatically. The number of people who could afford the opera had fallen with the collapsing markets, and competing entertainments, particularly the new "talking" movies, cut further into the audience.

Ironically, the fate of the Civic followed the pattern of the Auditorium, which it was built to supersede. Forty years earlier, Ferdinand Peck, the head of the Chicago Auditorium Association, envisioned an opera and theater that would be located in a mixed use building of unprecedented size. Like Insull, Peck had anticipated that the revenue from the commercial spaces in the Auditorium Building would generate enough income to support the theater, retire the debt, and pay dividends to its stock holders. The Auditorium was tremendously successful in terms of its design, engineering, decorative scheme, and acoustics, and was essential in promoting the reputation and careers of its architects, Adler & Sullivan. As a financial venture, however, it was a disappointment; the plan to support it went awry due in large part to the Depression of 1893. The downturn caused the offices and hotel in the Auditorium to fail to generate the income anticipated by the developers.

Due to the Great Depression the commercial spaces of the Civic Opera Building failed to support the opera company or to keep up the payments on the building, and the stock sold to finance it became worthless. The fate of the scheme to support a local opera house had again been sealed by an economic downturn immediately after its completion. In desperation, a subscription drive to save the company was launched at the end of the 1931-32 season. When it fell short, and the last line of credit provided by Samuel Insull's personal guarantees evaporated, the Civic Opera Company suspended operations. By the beginning of 1933 ownership of the Civic Opera Building reverted to the holder of its mortgage, the Metropolitan Insurance Company.

As the Great Depression deepened Insull's financial empire began to unravel. His fortune had been built in the electric power industry, and from 1892 until 1930 he had been president of the Chicago Edison Company, now Commonwealth Edison. During his tenure Insull introduced many innovations to the production of electricity, expanded service exponentially, and bought-out his competition. Through his efforts electric generating plants and distribution networks were established

The Auditorium Building, by Adler and Sullivan, shortly after its completion in 1889. The Auditorium was a venue for touring opera companies and, from 1910 to 1929, was the home of Chicago's resident opera companies.

throughout the Midwest, and he owned or controlled many utility and public transit companies throughout the region. The scale of his operations, his ruthlessness in dealing with competitors, and the position of power he attained made Insull an individual of national reputation who was both envied and despised.

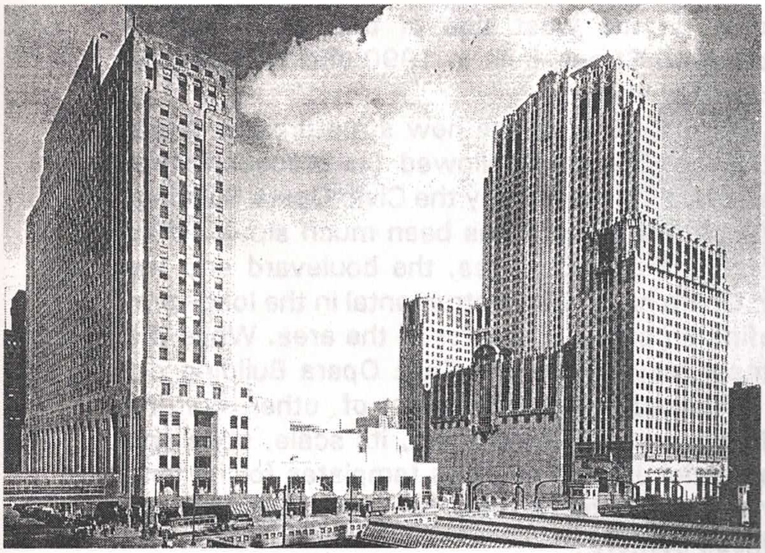
Insull had built his utility empire on leveraged monies in a manner that his critics compared to a pyramid scheme. When his companies collapsed he was indicted for fraud and embezzlement, which led to his flight from the country and eventual arrest and extradition from Istanbul, Turkey. Although Insull was later acquitted on all charges, his personal fortune, and his guarantees for the Civic Opera Company, were obliterated.

Simultaneously with the financial collapse of the Civic Opera Building, the plan to develop the West Loop into an extension of the central business area fell victim to the Depression. Development stalled through World War II, and when it resumed it focused on the established areas of the Loop. Nonetheless, by the late 1950s the impact of Union Station, the completion of Wacker Drive south to Van Buren Street, and the construction of the long-awaited highways to the west and northwest sides marked the beginning of a process that transformed the area west of Wells Street into an extension of the business center.

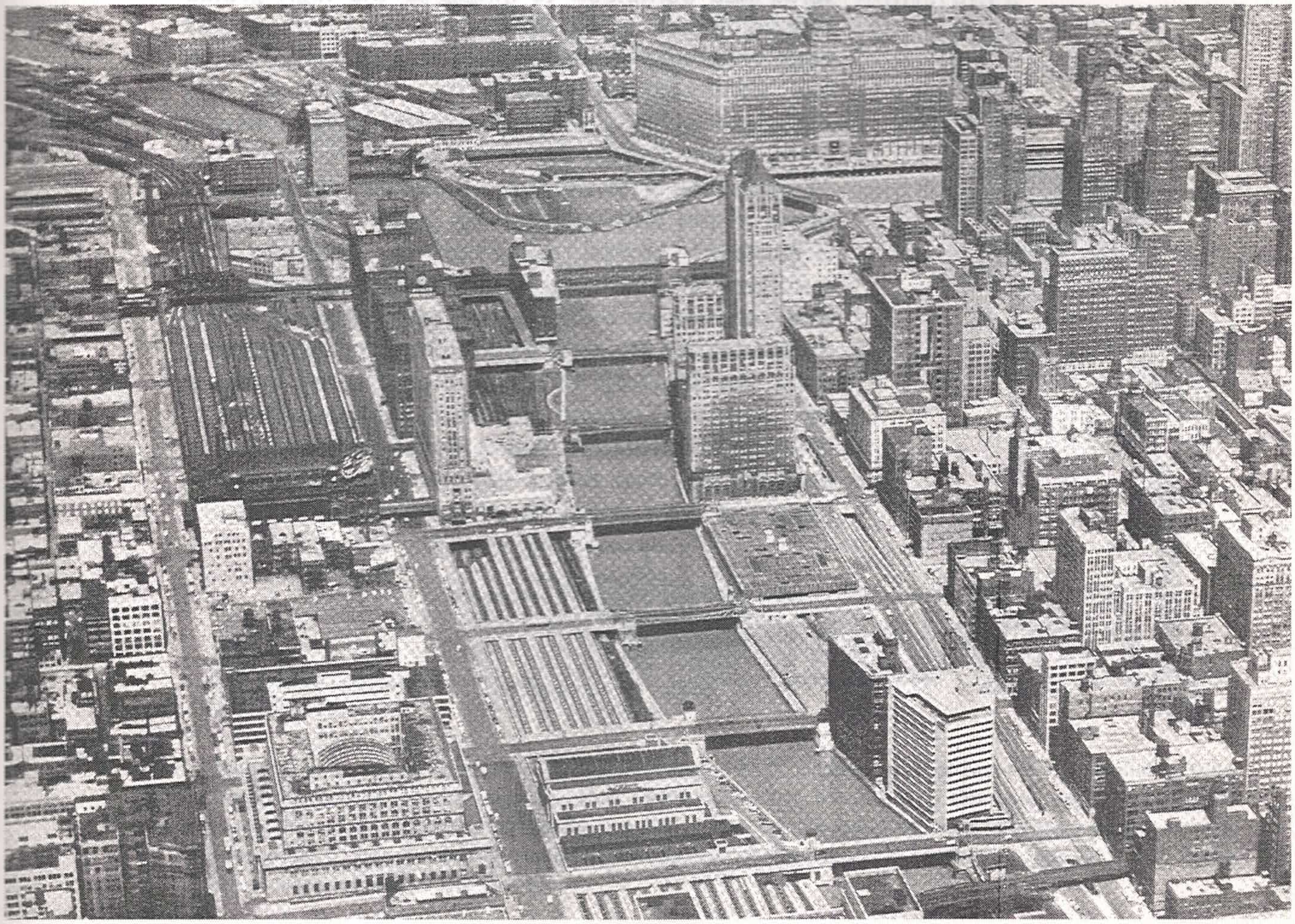
Three years after the construction of the Civic Opera Building, developer Samuel Insull was indicted for embezzlement and larceny and fled the country. Shown shielding his face from photographers in Athens, Greece, in October 1932, he was arrested in Istanbul and was tried four times on different counts. Insull was acquitted of all charges and lived his last years in Paris, dying in exile in 1938.

These transportation facilities encouraged the development of many new structures in the vicinity of the Civic Opera Building, including the Morton-Thiokol Building by Shaw, Metz and Dolio, completed in 1961, the United States Gypsum Building of 1963, designed by Perkins and Will at 101 South Wacker, and the 110-story Sears Tower, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and built at 233 South Wacker Drive between 1968 and 1974.

By the 1980s the area fulfilled Burnham's forecast, becoming a development mecca. The building boom was exemplified by the 1 South Wacker Building of 1982 by C.F. Murphy Associates; the twin towers of the new Chicago Mercantile Exchange, on the block south of the Civic, by Fujikawa Johnson and Associates, built form 1983 and 1987; the Northwestern Atrium Center on West Madison Street of 1987 by Murphy/Jahn; and the new Morton International



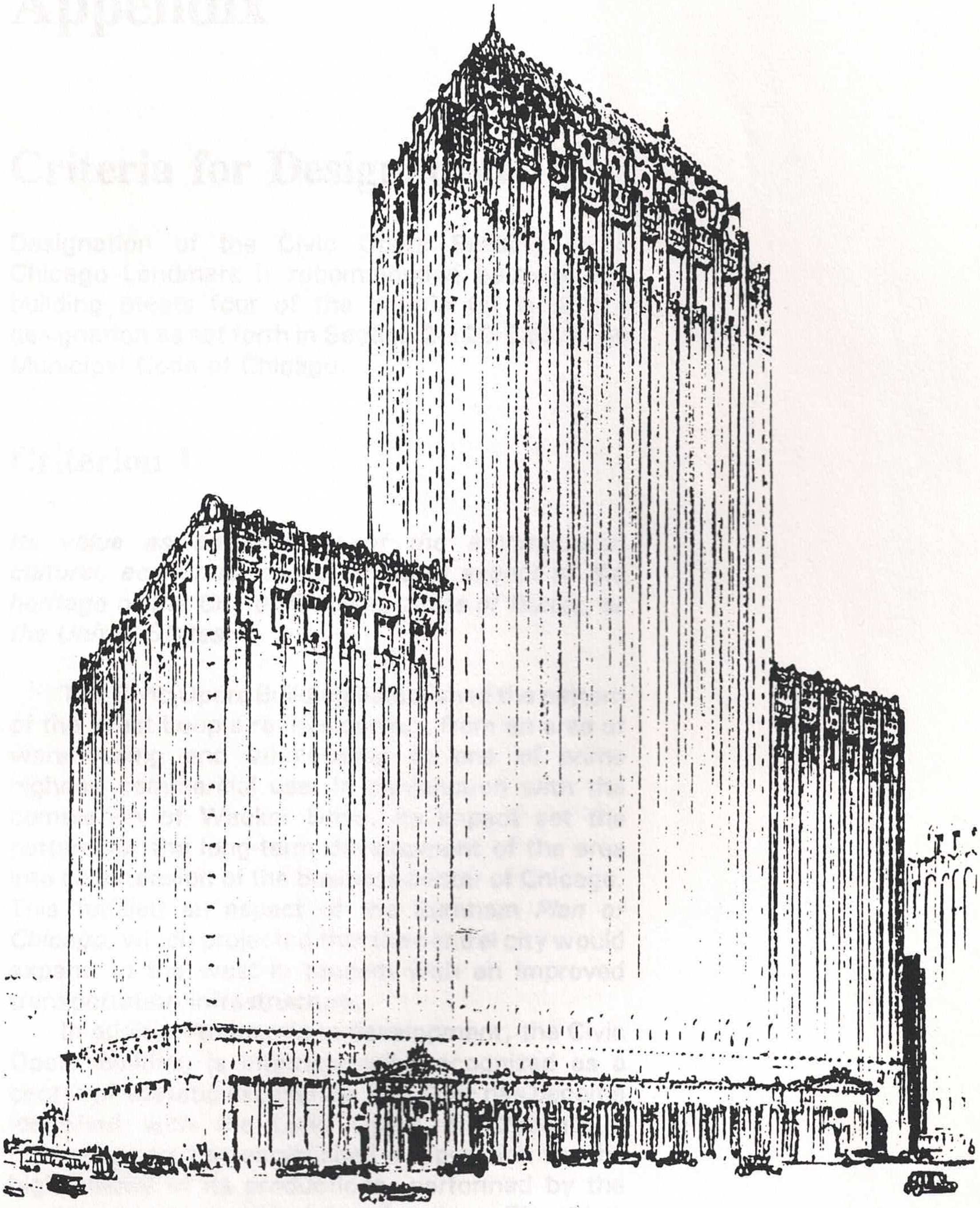
The Chicago Daily News Building and the Civic Opera Building (left) are seen from the southwest circa 1940. The two buildings form a prominent gateway along the South Branch of the Chicago River. Even though, from the time of their completion through the 1950s (below), the buildings were isolated from the business center, they have since become the nucleus around which the West Loop has developed.



Building on the west side of the river north of Washington Street, built in 1990 and designed by Perkins and Will.

The character of the new structures as prime commercial buildings followed the precedent first established for the area by the Civic Opera Building. Although the process has been much slower than its planners could foresee, the boulevard and the Civic Opera have been instrumental in the long-term redefinition of the character of the area. While the example provided by the Civic Opera Building did not encourage the relocation of other cultural institutions to the West Loop, its scale, style and commercial use did serve as templates for its long term redevelopment into an extension of the business center.

The role of the Civic Opera House as a dynamic force has continued to influence the high profile redevelopment of the West Loop. This process has been enhanced by the presence of the opera, which has continued to expand its role through the extension of its season, the establishment of the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists and the "Toward the 21st Century" initiative that presents opera of the 20th century. Its current "Building on Greatness" capital campaign is financing the purchase of the lower floors of the building and their renovation, bringing the opera house up to the most advanced technical standards, and is preparing it for the demands of operatic production into the new century. Through this effort, the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Civic Opera House will continue as anchors that help define the character of the West Loop and the cultural life of the city.



Drawing of the proposed Civic Opera Building, 1926. While the final form of the building was clearly defined in this pre-construction 1926 rendering, a number of changes were made later: the portico was extended to nearly the full length of the building, the windows of the fourth through sixth floors were recessed at the center of the facade (see photo, page 11), and three floors were added to the tower.

Appendix

Criteria for Designation

Designation of the Civic Opera Building as a Chicago Landmark is recommended because the building meets four of the criteria for landmark designation as set forth in Section 2-120-620 of the Municipal Code of Chicago.

Criterion 1

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Civic Opera Building established the pattern of the West Loop's redevelopment from an area of warehousing and wholesaling to one of prime highrise commercial use. In conjunction with the completion of Wacker Drive, its impact set the pattern for the long-term development of the area into an extension of the business center of Chicago. This fulfilled an aspect of the Burnham *Plan of Chicago,* which projected that the central city would expand to the west in tandem with an improved transportation infrastructure.

In addition to its role in development, the Civic Opera Building is internationally recognized as a center of operatic excellence. The Civic has become identified with the Lyric Opera of Chicago, a company that has established a reputation for the high quality of its productions, performed by the world's most renowned vocal artists. The Civic Opera Building has been the home of the Lyric Opera for 40 years, and the Lyric's current plan to update the facilities of the opera house assures that this association will continue for many years.

Criterion 3

Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Civic Opera Building was realized through the efforts of Samuel Insull, one of the most influential developers of electric utilities in the United States. Named by Thomas Edison as president of the company that later became Commonwealth Edison, Insull directed it from 1892 to 1930. He incorporated many innovations into the process of producing and distributing electricity during the infancy of the industry, and established electric generating plants and distribution networks throughout the Midwest. His control of utilities and transit companies made him a uniquely powerful individual in the financial and political affairs of Chicago.

As co-founder and president of the board of directors of the Civic Opera Company, Insull was responsible for the concept behind the erection of the Civic Opera Building. Its location on the boulevard and the river, development as a mixed-use performing arts facility, and financing were all directed or heavily influenced by him.

The Civic Opera Building is also associated with the Lyric Opera of Chicago and a great number of operatic performers of international stature, some of whom had their American debuts on its stage. Among these have been Maria Callas, Tito Gobbi, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Placido Domingo, and Kiri Te Kanawa. In addition to the performers, the list of significant talents associated with this building includes composers who have presented world debuts of their work here, including Philip Glass and William Bolcom, as well as numerous conductors, producers, and designers of note. Throughout its history the Lyric Opera of Chicago has been led by two of the most important opera executives: Carole Fox, who co-founded the company and was its general manager from 1954 to 1981; and Ardis Kranik, its current general manager.

Criterion 5

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Civic Opera Building was designed by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, the most prominent architectural firm in Chicago at the time of its construction. This company, which was a descendent of D.H. Burnham & Company, had a national reputation for its designs of first-class, highrise office buildings. From its founding in 1917, the firm received commissions to design many of the most well-known buildings in Chicago, including the Wrigley Building, Union Station, and the Merchandise Mart. The chief designer of the Civic was Alfred Shaw, who played an important role in introducing modern principles into the firm's works.

The Civic Opera is also associated with artist Jules Guerin, the interior designer of the opera house and its lobby. Guerin is best known as the principal illustrator of Burnham and Bennett's *Plan of Chicago*, where he gave visual form to the concepts of its planners. In addition, he worked with Graham, Anderson, Probst & White on the interior designs of a number of important buildings, in some cases painting murals and in others designing the public spaces.

Criterion 7

Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.

The Civic Opera Building is a monumental free-standing structure that defines the character of its neighborhood. Its prominence on Wacker Drive is due in part to its portico, which was designed after the facade of the famed Paris Opera. The portico forms a grand promenade along the boulevard that is unique in the streetscapes of the city.

The scale and bold massing of the Civic Opera Building give it an outstanding presence on the skyline. This is particularly true of its riverside elevation, where its distinctive profile embraces the river and opens to the West Side.

Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Based on its evaluation of the Civic Opera Building, the staff recommends that the significant historical and architectural features be identified as:

- all exterior elevations and roofs;
- the interior of the office tower lobby; and
- the entrance foyer, grand lobby, and the auditorium of the opera house, including their decorative details and the painting on the fire curtain by Jules Guerin.

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The Sky's the Limit (1990)
(p. 7 bottom)
Timothy N. Wittman, Department of Planning and Development
(pp. 12 top and bottom right; 13, 17)

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